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ABSTRACT

One of the most important areas for business educators to address in preparing their students to compete effectively in world markets is cross-cultural negotiating and conflict management. To do so, teachers must prepare students to understand the markets into which they enter as managers. The objective is not to learn a great deal about one culture or market, or to divide the world into foreign and domestic markets, but to promote a cross-cultural perspective on the global economy by training students to observe cultures and ask the right questions. An international business communication course offered at Eastern Michigan University takes a two-part approach to teaching conflict management and negotiation. In the first part, students are taught the seven factors most likely to change in a business setting across cultures: language, environment and technology, social organization, contexting, authority conception, nonverbal communication and behavior, and temporal conception. In the second part, students are taught to apply those factors to a five-step model for conflict management. While the approach is designed for business training, the concept underlying it can be applied to many disciplines in which cross-cultural interaction is a factor. (MSE)

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TEACHING CROSS-CULTURAL CONFLICT MANAGEMENT SKILLS

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TEACHING CROSS-CULTURAL CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

The Need for Cross-Cultural Conflict Management Skills

The American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), the accrediting agency for U.S. business schools, changed its standards in 1974 in a way that affects all concerned with the teaching of culture and language studies and the teaching of business. The AACSB required all accredited schools of business to reflect worldwide as well as domestic facets of business.

This modification of standards embodied a growing concern among the members of this most influential of accrediting agencies. In calling for a global focus for business curricula, at least among North American business schools, the AACSB officially acknowledged an issue which those in the business community itself have stressed for some time: business educators must prepare their graduates to participate effectively in an increasingly competitive and integrated world economy. As E. A. Costanyo, vice president of Citibank, has observed:

> Multinational business is becoming so important that the business school had better prepare its students for it. The young man who graduates from one of our business schools without the realization of the scope and thrust of multinational business is as unprepared for the reality of our economy as the young man who graduates without a little accounting knowledge. [1]

International trade and multinational operations have grown much more important to the business strength of the United States than in the past. Ironically, though, the global balance sheet for the United States has weakened dramatically over the last two decades. Many factors have, arguably, contributed to this weakened U.S. stature in the overal global economy. Low rates of productivity growth, domestic inflation and the comparative value of the dollar against other currencies have all influenced the nation's international trade record, as have other issues. However, many business experts have argued that among the most serious obstacles to success for the United States in international trade is the relative lack of sensitivity to the role intercultural factors play in conducting business in a global setting.[2]

International managers (and increasingly there can be no

wholly domestic managers) must be able to understand ways to cope with problems that arise out of channels, conflict and change peculiar to conducting business abroad. To do so effectively, managers must have the skills to participate in other nations' markets and business environments. Managers must learn to understand the nature of cultures other than their own.

As people shift from one culture to another, business practices shift as well. As Robert Moran and Philip Harris have observed:

> International managers agree that communicating with foreign managers and clients is a primary responsibility and usually involves negotiating with others who are culturally different. The key problem for these managers is addressing such factors as different negotiating styles and contrasting cultural conditioning, which make each nation's negotiators behave and react in many different and unpredictable ways. [3]

Among the most important areas that business educators thus need to address to prepare their students fully to compete effectively in world markets are cross-cultural negotiating and conflict management skills.

The Focus of Cross-Cultural Conflict Business Instruction

To teach cross-cultural business, including negotiating and conflict management skills, the instructor must prepare to students to fully understand the markets into which they enter as managers. Such skills, in turn, lead the manager away from a view of the world as divided into foreign and domestic markets. Instead of <u>foreign</u> markets their can only be someone else's <u>domestic</u> market. As Koji Kobayashi, the chairman of Nippon Electric Company, has said of his company's approach to the United States, "The United States is our second domestic market."[4]

Yet an understanding thorough enough to view another culture as a "second domestic market" is beyond the realm of a single college course. Indeed some may argue that for the purposes of conducting business in a global economy, learning a a large amount about single culture is in itself somewhat futile. The field in which global business is played is unlikely to limit itself to one or two select countries or cultures.

Instead those educators who wish to train their students for a productive part in an integrated world economy must provide

the students with a means of evaluating each culture in which they might find themselves. Instead of producing experts on, say, France or Japan or Indonesia, educators should strive to graduate experts on observing how business is conducted in other cultures, regardless of the nature of any one business or national setting. In short, educators should not provide students with a checklist of does and don'ts for conducting business in any particular culture. Instead, students should learn how to ask the right questions for wherever they may find themselves. By being trained to ask the right questions, the students can, in essence, train themselves for the various cultures in which they will eventually conduct business.

Cross-Cultural Conflict Management and Negotiation Instruction

In the international business communication course designed by the author and currently taught at Eastern Michigan University, a two-tiered instructional approach is taken for teaching conflict management and negotiations in a global setting. Both tiers rest on the question-asking framework described above. In the first tier, students are taught those factors most likely to shift in a business setting across cultures. In the second tier, students are taught to apply these factors to a five-step model for conflict management.

Essentially, students examine the role of seven central factors contributing to cultural differences likely to manifest themselves in the workplace. [5] The seven factors are summed up in a model called LESCANT, an acronym for the first letter of each factor: language, environment and technology, social organization, contexting, authority conception, nonverbal communication and behavior, and temporal conception. Each LESCANT factor, in turn, is divided into several subcategories. While some areas overlap at areas (religion, for example, falls firmly into social organization and authority conception in many cultures), on the whole, the questions derived under each are intended to be discrete areas of inquiry.

The students are then taught to apply the factors contributing to cultural differences to a five-part model for conflict management.[6] First students assess their own perspectives of the conflict situation, examining their own attitudes as shaped by the LESCANT factors. Second, the student is asked to acknowledge the other party' perspective, again examining the role the LESCANT factors play in that perspective. Third, the attitude of the conflicting parties is examined, that is the consideration of behavior and perspective from the point of view of both parties. Possible courses of action are decided upon next gauging solutions within a cultural context of such LESCANT affected variables as trust, credibility, problem expression, status, ability to accurately convey information, and flexibility. In particular the students strive for synergistic solutions in which cultural differences are approached not from a right or wrong approach

but from one in which entirely new alternatives surface, due to variant ways of viewing the situation inherent in cross-cultural differences. Finally, the student is encouraged to analyze the process as a review of the previous stages.

Concluding Comments

While the approach and need for cross-cultural training discussed here focuses on business training and conflict management in particular, one such training need not be limited to management classes. Indeed, in so multidisciplinary a field, it is important that the principles of cross-cultural interaction in any one field be reinforced in as many related fields as possible. Thus, while the language instructor might not necessarily discuss conflict management, the appropriateness of factors affecting cross-cultural differences in international conflict management would remain pertinent in discussion of the culture of the language taught. Similarly, instructors of other business studies -- marketing, finance or production systems -- might also find such an approach useful. Indeed, in an integrated world economy business students will be best prepared only when they receive a global perspective at least to some extent on all areas of study they undertake.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Quoted in Donald A. Ball and Wendell McCulloch, Jr., International Business: Introduction and Essentials, 2nd Edition, Plano, Texas: Business Publications, Inc., 1985, p.2.

[2] See, for example, Pierre Casse, Training for the Cross-Cultural Mind. Washington, D.C.: The Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research, 1980; Geert Hofstede, Cultures Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values. Beverly Hills, California: SAGE Publications, 1984; and Philip R. Harris and Robert T. Moran, Managing Cultural Differences. Houston: Gulf Publishing Co., 1979.

[3] Quoted in Simcha Ronen, Comparative and Multinational Management. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1986, p. 91.

[4] Quoted in Kenichi Ohmae, Triad Power: The Coming Shape of Global Competition. New York: The Free Press, 1985, p. 74.

[5] These factors were based on material compiled during an extensive study of the subject, sponsored in large part by two U.S. Department of Education grants that Eastern Michigan University received and which I co-authored and authored solely respectively.

[6] This model was developed with Deborah Borisoff and Maria Loffreddo, both of New York University.